

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS MEANING OF DOUBLE FUNERAL RITUALS AMONG THE KONKOMBA PEOPLE OF NORTHERN GHANA

Traditional African cultures consider life to be the greatest value. However, life is always connected with death, which as a universal phenomenon concerns each man individually and each social group. The tragic event of death carries with itself many negative phenomena such as feelings of sorrow, emptiness, disintegration and threat, with which the African peoples cope as a community, experiencing them in the family, lineage and clan groups. An indispensable help for the Africans in bearing the burden of this critical period are the funeral rituals, which are of social, religious and symbolic dimensions. They belong to rituals of passage, which are connected with a change of a person's status and social position.

The term "double funeral" is used by ethnologists and scholars of religions to define burial rituals and the rituals of the final, i.e. secondary funeral, which ultimately finishes the mourning period and includes the dead in the realm of ancestors, and integrates the community of the living. The phenomenon of a double funeral was first described by the French ethnologist Robert Hertz (1882–1915) in his pioneering extensive article entitled *Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort*, published in 1907.¹ This study is considered to be one of the most original 20th century analyses referring to death and funeral rituals.² Hertz refers to the communities in Indonesia, especially from the island of Kalimantan (Borneo) and other peoples from outside Indonesia.³

The paper presents social and religious meaning of the first funeral, i.e. burial rituals and the rituals of the secondary funeral among the Konkomba people of northern Ghana. Apart from the comparative African literature, the basic sources are primarily results of ethnographic and religious fieldwork that I conducted among the Konkomba people in the region of Saboba from July, 1984 till January, 1985 and from September, 1990 till August, 1991. Those studies were carried out among five tribes of this people, namely Bichabob, Nakpantiib, Binalob, Bimonkpom, Bigbem. They inhabit the areas situated near Saboba.

1. THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

The analysis of the social dimension of funeral rituals requires a short presentation of the social structure of the Konkomba people. The Konkomba are a segmentary group, where the power is traditionally wielded by the elders of the village with the oldest inhabitant or oldest member of the clan (*uninkpel*) at the head. The Konkomba have an agnatic, patrilineal system of kinship, in which the following ethnic groups are distinguished: an elementary (nuclear) family, an extended family, a minor lineage, a

¹ Hertz 1905-1906. 48–137.; Berthod 2005. 521, 526, 536.

² Palgi–Abramovitch 1984. 388.

³ On the rituals of a double funeral among the Indonesian peoples cf. Zimoń 2004. 200–202.; Berthod 2005. 526–528.

major lineage, a clan, a tribe and a people. The tribe is not a ritual group. According to the limited scope of social and political relations of the segmentary society, funeral rituals are of household, lineage, clan and supraclan range. The Konkomba consist of several tribes that are divided into patrilineal clans, which are in turn divided into major and minor lineages. Members of one clan inhabit one or more villages. The village comprises of a few to several homesteads. These are inhabited by about 20-30 persons usually belonging to a few families of brothers or their sons.⁴ Each person belongs to a definite lineage whose members descend from the common male ancestor. The social structure of the Konkomba is differentiated.⁵ Most Konkomba clans consist of compound and unitary clans. Kinship bonds are of fundamental importance in the social and religious life of the Konkomba.⁶

An important role among the Konkomba is also played by the ritual bonds between lineages and clans. Members of certain major lineages and clans of the same or – more rarely – another tribe are interrelated by the so-called ritual partnership relationship, and they are called *mantotiib*. Ritual bonds strengthen and stabilize the feeling of belonging to the clans of the same tribe group and they integrate and bind with each other a certain number of clans. The presence of ritual partners in funeral rituals is necessary since they perform important functions in various activities and burial rites as well as during secondary funerals.⁷

Besides kinship and ritual bonds, there are also the origin bonds between parental and offshoot (filial) clans, that is between the original clan and the new one, which were separated from the former sometime in the past. After the division, members of the new clan left the mother area and emigrated to another place. Ritual partners always have to be present during different rituals, whereas members of paren-

⁴ This is an extended family consisting of more than one elementary family occurring in a monogamous form, or one or more polygamous families (the husband has more than one wife), including husband or husbands with one or more wives and the offspring.

⁵ The British social anthropologist David Tait (1912–1956) distinguishes three kinds of clans: contrapuntal, i.e. contraposed clans, unitary clans and compound clans. A contraposed clan is divided into two major lineages whose ancestors descend from two different ancestors. A unitary clan consists of one major lineage, which is usually divided into a few minor lineages. All male members and unmarried women of such a clan come from one male ancestor. A compound clan is divided into two or more major lineages whose members come – or do not come – (e.g. Binalob clan from N-nalog) from one common male ancestor. Tait 1964. 34., 45. Tait conducted stationary fieldwork in the region of Saboba between August, 1950 and January, 1952. Tait 1964. XIV; Tait 1956. 219. Cf. also Zimoń 1998. 53.

⁶ The word *unibaan* is used to refer to a clan and a lineage. It literally means “ancestors of one man”, which means the descendants related by kinship bonds of the clan and lineage community. In the strict sense this term means the major lineage since its members really descend from one common male ancestor. On the other hand, clan members come from a real or supposed (fictional) ancestor. Langdon – Breeze (no date) 84. On the social structure of the Konkomba cf. Tait 1953. 213–216; Barker 1991. 7–9., 13; Zimoń 1992. 116. f.

⁷ Tait 1953. 217 f.; Tait 1964. 127–130.

tal/filial clans only participate in funeral rituals by sending colourful cloths to cover the dead person's body. Only sometimes do they participate in these rituals.⁸

Another type of social partnership is kith bonds, namely friendship bonds, which are established between members of neighbouring clans of the same tribe. The Konkomba describe these kith bonds by saying: "we know each other". These bonds are expressed in affinity (the choice of wives from neighbouring clans), in avoiding clan feuds, which occurred in the past, in friendship, and in participation in various rituals, particularly of first and secondary funerals⁹.

In the first funeral the burial is the most important in the social dimension. Due to the climatic conditions, the burial of the deceased takes place on the day of the death or on the next day, if the death took place in the afternoon, evening or at night. The fact of death (*nkuin*)¹⁰ in the homestead has to be confirmed by a man, the oldest inhabitant of the homestead. Notifying both the appropriate people and social groups and their participation in the burial are important in order to maintain proper social relations. The relatives and neighbours, who visit the homestead of the dead person, confirm the death. It is important that a man's death be confirmed by the relatives of the dead man's mother (*weejatiib*), while the death of a woman – by the relatives of her father (*chotiib*).

The number of participants in the burial of elderly people counts from 200 to 500, including many very old ones. Burial rituals of elderly people take the form of a grand cultural performance during which the greatest number of people take part as compared to all the other known rituals of passage celebrated by the Konkomba.

The period of mourning of the first funeral (*likpuul* in the Konkomba language) generally lasts three days in the case of a man's death and four in the case of a woman's death. The fulfilment of the rites of the first funeral ends the phase of excluding the deceased from the visible world of the living. This does not, however, mean that the funeral ritual is over since it is complemented by the secondary funeral (called *likpotoor*). These funerals take place in a given village every 3-4 years and they last from five to seven days, constituting an important social and religious event. All of the dead people who have died in a given village since the last secondary funeral are mentioned in the funeral celebrations.

For example, on the first day of the secondary funeral beer, which is used on the third day of the secondary funeral, was brewed for the first time in the villages of Nalongni, Sobib, Kumwateek (Bichabob tribe) and in the lineage of Mpwando in the

⁸ The examples of parental/filial clans are the clans of Mwagbartiib i Nakpantiib, Sambultiib and Saangutiib as well as the clans of Bumwateeb and Jagirdojaab from the village of Kpeg. Tait 1953. 217 f.; Tait 1964. 129–132.

⁹ Tait describes these bonds with a word kith. Tait 1953. 218 f.; Tait 1964. 131–133.

¹⁰ According to the dictionary of Langdon and Breeze, the word *nkun* means death. According to James Nkunji, the best expert of the Konkomba language and the dialect of the Bichabob from the region of Saboba, the correct spelling of this word is *nkuin*.

village of Sambul (Bimonkpom tribe).¹¹ Before noon of the second day, in total 27 bull-calves, seven cows and five heifers were killed in those four villages.¹²

On the fourth and fifth days of the secondary funeral all homesteads of the villages of Nalongni, Sobib, Kumwateek and Sambul were visited. The fourth day is called the time of great beer drinking (*ndaan saakpiin daal*). Huge expenses connected with the secondary funeral are testified to by the number of livestock, especially pigs, which were killed in the morning of the fourth day.¹³ Throughout the day hundreds of the Konkomba people successively visited all the homesteads of the villages of Nalongni, Sobib, Kumwateek and Sambul. In each of them the guests were treated to beer and they received a piece of meat which they took home. The fifth day is called the day of little beer drinking (*ndaan kpaal daal*). This day is also meant for visitors.

In the afternoon of the sixth day of the secondary funeral, shooting at a pole (called *lipil*) and a rooster took place in the hamlet of Chachakpaab in the village of Nalongni (20 March, 1991), where the deceased old man Pwanji Nantor, the oldest member of the Nalatiib clan was recalled. Also, by the afternoon of the sixth day, a pole was shot at (called *kipil* in the dialect of the Bimonkpom tribe) and a rooster in the lineage of Mpwando in the Sambul village (1st May, 1991), where Leengan, the headman of the village was remembered, the oldest man of the clan Sambultiib. The shootings aroused great emotions and joy. The fact that more than a hundred people took part in both ludic events points to a great interest shown by the men, women and children. Shooting at a pole and at rooster has a symbolic meaning, since it emphasizes the social position of the oldest member of the community and is aimed at honouring him as a famous hunter.

2. RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

A characteristic feature of the religions of the Konkomba and other peoples of sub-Saharan Africa is the lack of a distinct boundary between the natural and the supernatural worlds, between this visible and present world and one which is invisible and eternal, between the secular (*profanum*) and the religious (*sacrum*) spheres. African cultures are of religious character.¹⁴ One of the significant elements of the African tradition is the spiritual vision of life and the world, according to which all beings of the visible nature are connected with the invisible spiritual world. The worldview of African peoples is based on the unity of the cosmos, in which all supernatural beings, people and the whole of nature participate. The following categories of supernatural

¹¹ Beer, which was used on the fourth and fifth days of the secondary funeral, was also brewed on the following two days.

¹² The Sambultiib clan from the tribe of Bimonkpom inhabit Sambul village and it consists of 10 lineages. In eight lineages of this village secondary funerals were held between 26 April and 1st May, 1991. I took part in the secondary funeral of the Mpwando lineage and that is the reason why I provide information only from that lineage.

¹³ For example, in the Kotiengo lineage they slaughtered 14 cattle and 52 pigs, in the Wajado lineage (Chachakpaab hamlet) they killed two cattle and 16 pigs, whereas in the Mpwando lineage in the village of Sambul they killed 25 cattle and about 50 pigs.

¹⁴ Goody 1961. 151., 155.; Parrinder 1968. 27, Mbiti 1980. 16., 103.

beings are known in the system of beliefs of the Konkomba people: the god Uwumbor, the Earth deity Kiting, Earth spirits, protective spirits of the clan, gnome spirits of the bush, twin spirits, personal spirits of particular people, and ancestors. The Konkomba refer to these beings in burials and the rituals of the secondary funerals. An extremely important role in the religious and social life of the Konkomba is played by ancestors (*yajatiib*), who take an active part in the life of the community and who influence the life of the living. Ancestors constitute the continuity of the social structure, they maintain sacred the patrilineal social order based on the principles of kinship and primogeniture, and are also guardians for respecting and observing the ethic norms and all rules of the customary law. The importance of ancestors is testified to by the rituals of the first and secondary funerals, which express the bond between the dead and the living and make it possible for the dead to pass to the realm of ancestors (*yajatiibdo*).

A man's first funeral ends in the evening of the third day with a ritual called *lisaachong*, which is primarily of a religious character. When a woman dies, the ritual finishes on the fourth day. First, a rooster is killed in front of the exit hut from the homestead if a man has died; a hen is killed if the dead person is a woman. The ritual of *lisaachong* finishes with offering a cooked meal of yam and cereal in a few clay bowls or metal vessels. Clan ancestors connected by ritual partnership bonds as well as lineages of the same clan or certain neighbouring clans of the same tribe linked by kith bonds are mentioned.¹⁵

Divination rites (divination – *tibwar*) took place on the third, most important day of the secondary funeral. These divining rites aimed to explain the causes of the death of all the people who had died in the villages of Nalongni, Sobib, Kumwateek and Sambul since the previous secondary funeral. For example, in the Ngambwa lineage divination rites were performed by two men – diviners: Tadiin from the village of Takpamba (Togo) and Bicha – from the homestead of Taakum, the oldest inhabitant of the lineage of Ngambwa. Tadiin performed the function of the main diviner or master (*ubwa*), while Bicha was the master's helper (*ubwater*). The rites concerned five dead people, including the following men: Gungul, Talee, Yakpa, Gani, and a woman Akua. At 11.35 a.m. the diviners arrived at the homestead of Mukoo, the fifth oldest man in the lineage of Ngambwa. Bicha made an offering of beer on two divining staffs, saying: "*Today we are small children. Spirit of the Earth, rise and accept this beer. We have been asked to explain the incidents of death, and not to destroy. Spirit Tinoon*¹⁶, *accept this beer and help us. Twin spirits*¹⁷ *and gnome spirits of the bush*¹⁸, *accept this drink and help us. We do not want to cause unhappiness. Let the*

¹⁵ Zimoń 1998b. 149 f.; Zimoń 2005, 138–140.

¹⁶ Tinnon is a protective spirit of the Sobitiib clan who is responsible for marriage and the married couple.

¹⁷ The Konkomba and other African peoples have an ambivalent attitude to twins. They arouse joy, since they are the symbol of fertility, but also fear because they are considered to be dangerous and abnormal. The tribes of Bichabob and Bimonkpom are happy when twins are born. Dead twins (male and female) as ancestors are considered as fertility spirits, affecting the yields of the earth and the fertility of people and animals. Zimoń 1999. 120.

¹⁸ According to the beliefs of the Konkomba, gnome spirits (*bininkpiib* or *biponib*) are mischievous spirits that live in the bush, which can do harm to people, bringing infertility and

spirits of the dead speak and tell us what the cause of their death was. Gungul, younger brother Yakpa and sister Akua, tell us the truth. Our first mothers buried here, this is your beer for all of you."

Next, the diviners and the old men present there went to the homestead of the oldest dead farmer, Gungul. The divination rites took place in the outer yard and it lasted from 12.00 to 4.30 p.m. Its participants included the inhabitants of the Ngambwa lineage (men and women) as well as the relatives and people related by affinity of the dead woman Akua. The diviners and the elderly peoples of the lineage: Taakum, Bayei, Lundan, Tibi and Mukoo were sitting under a tree, in front of the entrance hut, while young men and women were staying separately at a certain distance.

Reflecting on the successive incidents of death was began with Gungul, the oldest inhabitant of the homestead at present belonging to the old man Tibi (Gungul's younger brother). Taakum said: *"Gungul, we lived in this village together and we had discussions. When you fell ill, I visited you and asked you with whom I have to rule in this village. You only beckoned with your hand as a farewell. Today you are staying near god Uwumbor. We do not know what it is like there. Today we want to ask whether we have to leave this village or stay here"*.

During the divination, using 10 kauri shells and three sticks, the diviners Ta-diin and Bicha explained to the elders and other participants of the divining celebration the cause of death of each person. According to the diviners, the causes of each five people's deaths were different, including discord and quarrels in the homestead, bringing about defilement of the Earth, which did not please the ancestors and the spirit of the Earth (Gungul); bad conduct and no contact with the inhabitants after emigrating to Salaga, lack of purification ritual after killing a dangerous animal (Talee); a sorcerer's activity (throwing bad sorcerer's medicine on the farm), richness and jealousy of the wives, children and other inhabitants of the village as well as negligence in practising the native ancestors' religion since Bayei, the father of his dead son Yakpa, in his homestead has spirit Tigari's shrines whose owner and protector is Bayei's son named Baakar¹⁹; the activity of a woman sorcerer who killed Gani; hatred of somebody from the village of Naachang towards husband named Maamumbi and his wife Akua, who died in hospital in Yendi during the birth of her fourth child. According to the old men, divination using kauri shells was the most important, while divination with three sticks only confirmed and explained in detail the causes of death previously given. It should be emphasized that divination during the funeral also has a didactic dimension because it teaches the listeners respect for the tradition, observance of social norms and moral order both in individual and community life.

After divination rites were finished at 4.30 p.m. the diviner Bicha made an offering of beer to the twin spirits, the Earth spirit named Bangaatingbann²⁰, the mischievous gnome spirits of the bush and the protective spirits of the clan. In his prayer the diviner ascertained that the Earth was defiled due to quarrel and discord between

different diseases, especially mental ones. Spirits of the bush can also help people for their remembrance in prayers and offerings. Zimoń 1999. 120 f.; Zimoń 1992. 123 f.

¹⁹ Zimoń 1992. 46–49.

²⁰ Bangaatingbann is the proper name of the Earth spirit of the Sobibtiib clan. Zimoń 1998a. 81, 124 f.

the inhabitants of the Sobib village. He asked the supernatural beings for unity, joy and health of the inhabitants of the village.

CONCLUSIONS

The rituals of first and secondary funerals in Africa belong to the most extended of all rituals of passage. African peoples do not treat the fact of death as immediate and ultimate. The Konkomba perceive death as a process that lasts 3-4 years. Anthropological and religious thanatological studies show the decisive importance of social and religious aspects of death and its experiencing in funeral rituals among African peoples. The article analyses and interprets social and religious meaning of the first funeral, i.e. burial rituals and the rituals of the secondary funeral among the Konkomba people of northern Ghana. Apart from the comparative African literature, the basic sources are results of ethnographic and religious fieldwork that the author conducted among this people in the region of Saboba from July, 1984 till January, 1985 and from September, 1990 till August, 1991. In summary, we can state the following:

1. The participation of the closest relatives and related inhabitants of the village connected by kinship bonds, members of certain lineages and clans connected by ritual bonds and members of parental/filial clans (connected by the bonds of origin) as well as clans linked by friendship bonds is considered obligatory or recommended.
2. The grave of the oldest people (men and women) is placed close to the homestead, on the right or left side of the entrance hut leading to the homestead, it symbolizes the bond of the ancestors with the living.
3. Secondary funerals require substantial financial expenses, which is reflected in the fact of slaughtering a large number of cattle and pigs. The number of participants of the secondary funeral in the village on the fourth day shows the wealth and social prestige of the village inhabitants and it reflects tribute paid to and respect towards the elderly and other deceased inhabitants of the village and clan members. After the secondary funeral the property of deceased men (land, wives, sacred objects and authority) is inherited and taken over via mediation of the oldest member of the lineage by his patrilineal descendants, that is brothers and sons, according to the principle of primogeniture.
4. The performance of different rites and symbolic activities during double funeral rituals emphasizes that the dead and the community change their roles and functions. The dead person is transformed from somebody who threatens the community to its guardian protector as a member of the invisible community of the dead. The secondary funeral ultimately finishes the mourning period after the deceased, it confirms the triumph of the community over death, emphasizes the value of life and leads the community through hard time of sorrow, threat and crisis caused by the death of its members. Besides, the secondary funeral integrates the family, lineage, clan and supraclan groups, it marks a change of status and helps the living people to accept the new state, and introduces them to the normal relationship with the clan community and other people.

5. The religious importance of double funeral rituals is manifested by prayers and offerings, in which the Konkomba turn to supernatural beings, especially Earth spirits, protective spirits of the clan and ancestors. These rituals express the Africans' belief in the afterlife, the importance of ancestors and their bond with the living, at the same time enabling the deceased persons (elderly men and women) – due to their age, social status and offspring – to move to the realm of ancestors and to attain the dignity of ancestors.

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